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Luppes, Jeffrey P.

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Jeffrey Luppes, PhD
Indiana University South Bend

Memorializing the GDR: Monuments and Memory After 1989
by Anna Saunders
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Instead of the "land of poets and thinkers", perhaps Germany should be known as the "land of monuments." The country is filled with memorials of various kinds, including large-scale national monuments, local memorials to the fallen of the First World War, tens of thousands of *Stolpersteine* ("stumbling stones") dedicated to individual victims of National Socialism, as well as over fifteen hundred monuments dedicated to the German victims of flight and expulsion at the end of the Second World War, among innumerable others. While many have been erected with little fanfare, others have spawned intense public debates that in some cases last years. Simply put, monuments are a big deal in Germany. It is clear that monuments and the discussions that surround them shed light on the commemorative priorities in a given place. As a result, they are a fruitful source for ascertaining how a country views its history and they rightfully draw the attention of scholars around the world.

Writing about monuments is challenging, however. First, not everyone is convinced of their value. After all, as Robert Musil, in a frequently cited essay once observed, "[M]onuments are conspicuously inconspicuous. There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument."[1] In time, some monuments certainly do become less noticeable, for example, if they are lower profile to begin with, off the beaten path, or not the site of regular commemorative ceremonies. Moreover, large numbers of monuments makes gathering information daunting. Depending on the initiator, scholars must either to locate materials in official archives or track them down in private hands.

[1] The quotation goes on: "They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment." This quotation is cited virtually everywhere in the literature on monuments. The English citation is taken from: Robert Musil, Posthumous Papers of a Living Author. Tr. Peter Wortman. (Hygiene, Colorado: Eridanos Press, 1987), p. 61.

Furthermore, visiting all the examples of certain kinds of monuments to experience how they are situated in the topography and to observe how people interact with them is a crucial step in examining these commemorative objects, but it is also expensive and time-consuming. In addition, the large numbers of monuments can make it difficult for studies to be comprehensive. Even if a study truly were exhaustive, reading descriptions, interpretations, and analyses of thousands of monuments would be trying and unwieldy for even the most dedicated scholar. As in all large-scale projects, studiers of monuments must strike a delicate balance between coverage and detail. For this reason, identifying and selecting ideal types can be difficult and opens up these scholarly endeavors to charges of "cherry picking" the most compelling examples while overlooking those that do not further the argument. Clearly, researchers have their work cut out for them when tackling monuments.

Obviously aware of these potential pitfalls, Anna Saunders has written a cogent and innovative new study about commemorative sites in the former East Germany called *Memorializing the GDR: Monuments and Memories after 1989*. As Saunders convincingly shows, reunited Germany's new federal states have featured hotly contested debates over how best to remember the recent past in public. Saunders does not concentrate on both parts of Germany's double past. As the title indicates, she looks at commemorative sites for the events, places, and people associated with the GDR, not at commemoration of the victims of National Socialism. These pasts are often difficult to disentangle, however, and at some sites they even butt up against each other in ways that have significant impacts for victims groups of both dictatorships. For examples, Saunders describes the efforts to commemorate the detainees – in most cases, lower-level Nazi functionaries and other opponents of the Soviets, many of whom died while in custody – held at special camps at former Nazi concentration camp sites in the first few years after the war.

The massive political and social changes after 1989/1990 allowed for these victims of the Soviet dictatorship to be remembered publicly, something that would not have been allowed by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR. There as elsewhere, new groups overlooked in the GDR were now being commemorated. Indeed, the thorny post-reunification disputes at the Soviet special camps constitute but one of the five thematic areas Saunders explores in her captivating study. The first of the major thematic groups include the discussions over what to do with the monuments dedicated to socialist icons such as Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, and Ernst Thälmann, which had been erected throughout the former GDR prior to 1989, but which authorities and concerned citizens obviously viewed differently after the *Wende*. Another thematic area is the commemoration of the first major uprising in the Eastern bloc on June 17, 1953—events which had featured prominently in West German commemoration before reunification but which had hitherto not been addressed in the East, where the insurrection actually took place. Saunders' fourth thematic area is the Berlin Wall – for many the chief symbol for oppression behind the Iron Curtain – and the twists and turns in remembrance thereof has taken over time. The final thematic area addresses the many efforts across the new federal states to commemorate the peaceful revolution of 1989/1990 as a whole—a difficult task in a country where positive nationalism is often viewed suspiciously.

Saunders thoroughly examines several memorial sites within each thematic area. Although Berlin is the location of many of the most notable and familiar cases, she deliberately draws her examples from throughout the former East Germany—a commendable and necessary decision. As Saunders shows throughout her study, the location of these monuments matters. In Berlin, the memory landscape is particularly cluttered. The debates over how to remember the past in the capital feature more voices and all aspects of the monuments face more scrutiny. In addition,

because of the other national monuments already there, such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, any new monuments to be emplaced in Berlin are automatically in dialogue with other monuments making the memory spaces even more contested. Monument initiators outside of the capital face far less acrimony. At the same time though, as Saunders continually makes clear, the initiators of the monuments also matter. Who has control of memory? Regional monuments in the new federal states are far more palatable when initiated by locals. As the book makes clear, East Germans have taken longer to warm to – and have outright rejected – proposals for monuments from West Germans. It appears that the citizens of the former GDR have not wanted memories or forms of remembrance foisted upon them; indeed, one of the most interesting legacies of the peaceful revolution of 1989/1990, as Saunders points out, has been the call for democratization in the process of erecting monuments. Public input is expected. Furthermore, the book shows that timing matters for these monuments. Particularly in the debates over remembrance of the Berlin Wall, efforts failed in the immediate aftermath because emotions were still too raw. Far less time for deliberation of the proper places and forms for commemoration had passed than the national Holocaust memorial in Berlin, for example, which was dedicated sixty years after the end of the Second World War. As Saunders shows in case after case, the political needs of the present have also shaped discussions of the past. Invoking the GDR past, as symbolized at these sites, has been a common ploy for post-reunification politicians.

Saunders' greatest achievement with this thoroughly researched and persuasively argued book is revealing the catalyzing role monuments have played as vehicles for negotiating new post-reunification German identity. Her balanced approach to monuments, which considers them above all "as processes and social spaces, rather than as fixed spaces or static objects" (44) is unique and should be a model for other researchers. In effect, Saunders vivifies the monuments of the former

GDR by using them as a jumping off point, rather than as an end point, for her analysis. Moreover, she sees them not as the embodiment of collective memory, as other observers might, but instead believes they "serve as a locus of interaction, discussion and meaning-making" (27). Their impact lasts far longer than one might expect as well observing that we should also take note of the "relationships that are set in flow (rather than in stone) throughout the process of memorialization, and which may extend long beyond the dedication of a monument" (321). Thus, Saunders' laudable study offers a convincing rebuttal to Robert Musil and to anyone else who questions how much monuments should garner our attention.